

William Chamberlen

THE INVENTOR OF THE MIDWIFERY FORCEPS

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Whether William Chamberlen was the first inventor of midwifery forceps or not is a question that cannot yet be satisfactorily answered, but there is no doubt that he was the first to originate and use the forceps generally in obstetric practice.

The history of the Chamberlen forceps, how the secret was closely guarded by the family for over a century is one of fascinating interest.

About the middle of the year 1569, a family of Huguenots, driven from Paris by the religious persecution, arrived in Southampton, where already a small colony of their compatriots had settled. In the register of the Church of St. Julien, Southampton, there is a record of "Chambrelen, Villame, reçu à la Cène, le trois juillet, 1569." At that time, William Chamberlen had three children, named respectively Peter, Simon and James. In the register of children baptised in the Church of Walloon foreigners in the town of Hampton, it is recorded that "Jacques, fils de Villame Chambrelen et de Geneviève Vignon, sa femme, fut baptisé le 26e jour de juillet 1569. Le père et la mère sont de Paris." In 1572 another son was born who was also named Peter.

Although there is no positive evidence of the fact, it is probable that William Chamberlen was originally a surgeon or apothecary, as his nephew states that he had been "nursed up as from the cradle to all parts of physick." As the family grew up they all seem to have followed in the footsteps of their father and specialised with success in midwifery.

Of their history at this time little is known. The elder son, Peter, appears to have succeeded to his father's practice, and it is recorded that he was fined several times, while practising in Mark Lane, London, for failing to confine himself to the practice of surgery. Frequent complaints against him in this respect are to be found in the Annals of the Royal College of Physicians, notably one in 1612, when it was demanded "if he gave not physick to one Mrs. Miller in my Lo. Mayor's House he gave her a drinke

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for three days to dry up a moisture which he supposed came from her backe: The drinke he also made himselfe, aquae ij, sarsae lb. ij, aq, liq, i; sassafras i, betonie mj, decoct. ad consumpt. medict cap., bis in die ad iij pro dosi, he conceived they wear the whites because he sawe yellow staynings upon the clothes."

It was unanimously agreed that he had given the medicine wrongly and his work was condemned, and a warrant signed for his apprehension and removal to Newgate prison. Four days later a meeting took place at the College to consider the imprisonment and release of "Peter Chamberlen, Surgeon, Senior." Peter was able to confound the College, for he induced the Lord Mayor and the Archbishop of Canterbury to intercede for him, and in the end he was released.

In 1614, among the fees and annuities paid out of King James' exchequer to the physicians, surgeons and apothecaries occurs the name of "Peter Chamberlen, Surgeon" for the sum of £40.

His younger brother, Peter followed in his footsteps, and received the Bishop of London's license to practise midwifery in 1600. He was also often hailed before the College of Physicians for exceeding the limits of his practice as a surgeon or apothecary, and also for the use of violent language.

In 1616, when the College of Physicians brought forward a scheme for the incorporation of midwives, Peter the younger appears as their champion, and boasted before the meeting that he and his brother, and none others excelled in that subject.

The son of Peter the younger and Sarah de Laune was born in the parish of St. Anne, Blackfriars, May 8th 1601, and was also christened Peter, the third Chamberlen of the name. He was the first to qualify properly as a physician, being admitted to Emmanuel College, Cambridge in 1615, and studied subsequently at Heidelberg and Padua. At the latter university he obtained the M. D. degree in 1619, when only eighteen years of age. On this degree he was incorporated at Oxford in 1620 and at Cambridge in 1621. Like his father and uncle, he chiefly practised obstetrics, and established a lucrative practice and a considerable reputation both at home and abroad. He also interested himself in the scheme for the incorporation of midwives, which had been in abeyance for a number of years. He was appointed physician in extraordinary to James I, and appears to have been the most successful

of all the family. He died at Woodham, Mortimer Hall, in Essex in 1683, and his tomb remains in the churchyard of that village.

He seems to have been the first to adopt the Anglicised spelling of his name. The will of his uncle begins, "I, Peter Chambrelan the elder," that of his father, "I, Peter Chambrelan the yonger," while his own is signed "Chamberlen."

Which of the family was the inventor of the forceps it is impossible to say, but probably William devised the first towards the end of the sixteenth century, and they were probably improved by his elder son, Peter. Smellie speaks of "the uncle" as the inventor, and Hugh Chamberlen says "my father, brothers and my Self (there are none else in Europe that I know) have attained to and long practised a way to deliver Women. . . ."

In a document addressed to the Archbishop of Canterbury by the College of Physicians about the year 1640, there is a reference to "the use of Iron instruments" which shows that they were known to be in use at that time.

In an autobiography written by Peter Chamberlen, the grandson, entitled "a Voice in Rhama" (1647) he says, "Fame begot me envy and some enemies, which mightily increased when my father added to me the knowledge of delivery and cures of women." He defends the principle of keeping secret new remedies and operations.

Hugh Chamberlen, son of Peter the third, was responsible for the publication of that secret which his predecessors had guarded with such jealous care. He was born about 1632, and became physician in ordinary to Charles II in 1673. He appears to have prospered in practice and gained much popularity as an accoucheur. Burnett refers to him as "the man midwife who was always ordered to attend the queen." It is recorded that on April 17th 1692, "Dr. Chamberlen had the honour to lay the Princess (Anne of Denmark) of a son which immediately died. He had a hundred guineas for his pains."

He was a prolific writer of pamphlets, and seems to have interested himself extensively in politics.

The idea of selling the secret of his family seems to have been contemplated by him for many years. In 1673 he went to Paris and attempted to dispose of it to the First Physician to the King for the sum of ten thousand livres, claiming that by its aid he could deliver in less than half a quarter of an hour the most

difficult cases. At that time Mauriceau had a patient, a rachitic dwarf, whom he had given up. She had been in labour for eight days, and the famous French physician had refused to perform a Caesarian operation. Hugh Chamberlen undertook to deliver her, but worked with his instruments for over three hours in vain. The patient died, and the autopsy revealed the uterus torn freely by the blades of the forceps. This unfortunate experience precluded any possibility of selling the forceps in Paris but he is said to have returned through Holland, and there to have met Roonhuysen. A few years later he visited Holland again, driven there, it is said, by the fall of James II in England, and from this date begins the romance of the Roonhuysen lever. Whether Hugh Chamberlen sold only part of the secret, or whether the lever was, in fact, an invention of Roger Roonhuysen himself, will probably never be determined. When this mysterious instrument emerged from the mists of the secrecy with which it was guarded some eighty years later, it had become a simple lever or vectis.

The three possessors of the secret were at first, the Roger Roonhuysen aforesaid, one Corneille Bolkemann, surgeon, and Frederick Ruysch, the famous anatomist of Amsterdam. These three admitted to the secret two of Roonhuysen's apprentices, named Jean de Bruin and Peter Plaatmann.

The agreement as to the possession of the secret was signed on the 21st of March, 1709, and the whole matter organised as a commercial proposition. The sons of Bolkemann and Plaatmann inherited it from their fathers, and from 1709 to 1720 the possession rested with Andre Bolkemann, de Bruin and Plaatmann.

In 1721 three new members were admitted, and for the next fourteen years the firm consisted of Plaatmann junior, Titsing, Boom, de Moor and Trochin. In 1735 Plaatmann sold the secret to a Utrecht surgeon named van Dieden for 1,500 Dutch florins, undertaking not to reveal it to anyone during the lifetime of the vendor, under pain of a fine of 1,000 ducats. Regner Boom was instructed by de Bruin for a 2,000 florins premium, and the promise of a half share in all that Boom should make out of it during the lifetime of de Bruin.

So great was the power of this combine that they were able to get a law passed on January 21st, 1747, forbidding any practitioner to exercise the art of obstetrics in Amsterdam unless he had

passed an examination in the presence of these accoucheurs, and had purchased the famous secret.

There are some other interesting records concerning later members of the Chamberlen family. Hugh Chamberlen had a brother named Paul, who was born in 1635, in Blackfriars, and practiced in London as a man midwife, being also in possession of the secret. His home was in Great Suffolk Street, Haymarket, London, but he does not seem to have met with so great a success as his elder brother, and is perhaps best known as the inventor of the "celebrated anodyne necklace, recommended to the world by Dr. Chamberlen for children's teeth, women in labour, etc." This was nothing but a coral necklace, but it had apparently a large sale, as trade tokens are still extant concerning it. It continued to be sold for years after the death of its inventor in 1717, and is advertised as being sold "up one pair of stairs at the sign of the Anodyne Necklace, next to the Rose Tavern without Temple Bar." John, a younger brother of Hugh and Paul, practised midwifery in Clement Danes until his death in 1700.

Hugh's eldest son, also called Hugh, was born in 1664 and was educated at Trinity College Cambridge, where he obtained a degree of Doctor of Physic in 1689. Unlike his father and grandfather, he dabbled neither in politics or religion, and seems to have led a peaceful life practising in King Street, Covent Garden. In Garth's famous satire, "The Dispensary" Hugh Chamberlen the second appears as Pylas. His death was announced in "The Country Journal" of Saturday, June 22nd 1728 as follows:—"The eminent physician and man midwife, Dr. Hugh Chamberlen, who died on Monday night was grandson of the famous Dr. Peter Chamberlen, who with his father and uncles were physicians to King James I, King Charles I, King Charles II, King James II and King William, to their respective Queens and to Queen Anne. He was the last of that ancient family who practised the art of midwifery in the Kingdom, except Dr. Walker of Great Suffolk Street, who is the grandson of the aforementioned Dr. Peter Chamberlen."

Catherine, Duchess of Buckingham, with whom Hugh Chamberlen lived on the most intimate terms, had an ornate cenotaph erected to his memory in Westminster Abbey.

Hugh Chamberlen the elder seems to have been the first to feel any need for apology. In his preface to his translation of Mauri-

ceau's work on midwifery he says, "I will now take leave to offer an apology for not publishing the secret. I have mentioned that we have to extract children without Hooks, where other Artists use them, which is, that there being my Father and two Brothers living, that practise this Art, I cannot esteem it my own to dispose of, nor publish it without injury to them; and I think I have not been unserviceable to my country, altho I do but inform them that the forementioned three Persons of our Family and MySelf can serve them in these Extremities, with greater safety than others."

Much obloquy has been heaped on the Chamberlen family for their commercial spirit and secrecy with regard to their invention, but it must be remembered that the spirit of to-day with regard to medical secrets is one of recent growth, or at any rate, one that had fallen into abeyance during the period in which the earlier Chamberlens lived. Ruysch, part owner of the Roonhuysen secret, perfected a method of preparing anatomical preparations which died with him, and there are many other examples of distinguished medical men who did not scorn to use their own inventions to their own advantage.

Our knowledge of what the Chamberlen instruments were actually like was very slight until 1813, when a most interesting discovery of a probably complete set of them was made in a secret depository at Woodham, Mortimer Hall in Essex, the home of Dr. Peter Chamberlen in his later days, and where he died in 1683.

A complete set of replicas of these historical instruments, which came into the possession of Mr. Carwardine and were presented by him to the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society of London, are in the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum in that city. The romantic story of their discovery is thus related by Mr. Carwardine:—"The principal entrance to the mansion is through a porch, the masonry of which being carried up with the building, serves as closets or cupboards to each respective storey. Two or three years ago a lady with whom I am intimately acquainted, and from whom I had the particulars, discovered in the floor of the upper closet a hinge, and tracing the line she saw another which led to the obvious conclusion of a door. This door she soon found means to open. There was considerable space between the floor and the ceiling below, and this vacancy contained diverse empty boxes, etc. Among these was a curious chest or cabinet in which was deposited a collection of old coins, trinkets, gloves, fans,

spectacles, etc., with many letters from Dr. Chamberlen to different members of his family, and also the obstetric instruments."

Another account of their discovery was obtained by Dr. Robert Lee from Dr. May. He tells us that the instruments were discovered in June 1813 by a Mrs. Kemble, "who happening to go into a closet above the entrance porch was struck with the appearance of a cork or small disk of wood in the floor. A second one was then noticed on a level with the board. On investigation these were found to each cover a screw-head; on pursuing the enquiry, a trap door with small sunken hinges was noticed. On elevating this a cavity between the floor and ceiling was brought to view. This contained some boxes in which were two or three pairs of the midwifery forceps, several coins, a medallion of Charles I or II, a miniature of the Doctor damaged by time, a tooth wrapped in paper, written on 'My husband's last tooth,' some little antique plate, a pair of lady's long yellow kid gloves in excellent preservation, a small testament date 1645. These three latter articles I have seen in Mrs. Codd's possession. The space under the floor is about $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet square and about 12 inches in depth. There are two pieces of iron projecting from under the boards, with holes in them for the reception of the screws in the trap. This remains now in the same condition as it was when discovered forty-eight years ago. The concealment was evidently made subsequent to the death of Dr. Chamberlen which occurred in 1683, as the testament above alluded to bears a manuscript date of 1695."

The importance of the discovery of these instruments in the house of Dr. Peter Chamberlen is obvious. They may indeed have been the set of models which they kept secret for so long as they show evidence of distinct stages of development. The instruments are crudely made, and are such as might be wrought by any ordinary blacksmith. They consist of four pairs of forceps, three crotches, three levers, or what might be better described as vectis and hook combined, and three fillets.

